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## Waiting for Randall

Alexandra Leake

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## WAITING FOR RANDALL

I'D BEEN WAITING FOR MY brother Randall ever since he left with Pa, but I started waiting hard the day my mama went out driving with Mister Leonard. That's what she told me to call him, Mister Leonard, when he came that afternoon. He drove up in his big old tail-finned car, bouncing along the dirt path through the woods. Mama, she pretends it's a road. What she thinks is road about it has got me fooled. The grass is so high in the middle that it swishes on the underbelly of anything on wheels. I guess that's just how she gets by, pretending things are different than they are.

I could tell Mister Leonard wasn't sure he was in the right place, it not being a real road or anything. He stopped at the edge of the meadow, and his car's long snouty black nose looked like it was smelling where the road went. But then he must've seen there's no other place it goes to. It just peters out in the meadow in front of the cabin. This cabin wasn't meant for living, Mama said the day we moved. Your grandpa he built it for fishing. But it's where we've been living since the mill closed, right after Christmas, the same day we took down the tree. Pa raised it out of the pail of coal it'd been standing in, and lugged it out behind the old house, leaving a black trail in the snow.

Mama'd told me this new friend of hers was coming. While she was doing her nails, she told me, flattening out the little brush in a shiny red fan. He works at Steigerwalt's, she said, the shoe store down in Holyoke. You've never been there, but you might get a new pair out of him, if you just mind good. She held up one hand at a time, fanning out her fingers and wiggling them. You like the color? Here. Blow.

Mister Leonard was wearing the whitest shirt I'd ever seen. People I know don't usually wear white shirts, not even on Sundays, but his shirt was so white it was almost blue, and there were creases up on the shoulders where it'd been folded. He had a brown jacket slung over his shoulder and big old pleats in the front of his pants. The pants were all poufed out, and they looked

like what Christopher Columbus wears in picture books. He wore his hat pushed back off his forehead in the heat.

He saw me before he even slammed the car door. I was up there on the porch rocking in my chair. There're so many slats missing, I'm the only one that sits in it. Before he left with Randall, Pa took to calling it Bean's Chair. You're about as tall and skinny as a string bean, he'd say. Sundays, though, my pa always called me Gracie. My pa is the handsomest man in Franklin County.

When I didn't say anything, Mister Leonard reached down as if he was bowing, and snagged a blade of grass. He blew on it 'til it squawked, and then he looked up at me and smiled. His teeth were big and square like the tiles from the kit Pa'd ordered last fall in the mail. Mosaic, he called it. He said it'd take Mama's mind off things. She started gluing them one by one onto this tabletop, but when she didn't do but half, Pa and me finished it. Still, we couldn't help with its puniness, or with it never sitting right. You do the best you can, Pa said. That's all you can do.

Missy, your mama home? Mister Leonard asked.

I didn't have a chance to say nothing before Mama came pushing through the screen door.

Oh, you found us, she said, as if we'd been lost. She was wearing her new church dress, the one she made from a Ward's pattern after Randall left and she didn't have to wear the cinnamon polka dot one all the time. I could tell she'd been spraying herself with that atomizer she kept on the windowsill.

Yes, Ma'am, Mister Leonard said, switching his jacket from one shoulder to the other, and he grinned at my mama. His face was smooth as soap, but when he grinned it bunched all up in his cheeks.

She came down the steps right to him, and she crooked her finger at me. Have you met Gracie? She was fingering the flip in her hair like she always did, but her voice sounded different, as if she was giving him a present.

Sure, he said, looking up at me. He turned his face a little and winked with his closest eye so she couldn't see. I met Gracie. Such a tall girl. Jeez, and pretty, too.

I hadn't stood up more than halfway out of the rocker, but I sat right back down in it.

You be all right now, Gracie? Mama asked. She'd only half



turned back toward me. We're just going for a ride, she said. Up to the old limestone quarry where it's cool. Now you fix yourself a jelly sandwich for a snack. There's some store-bought white bread in the breadbox I got for a treat.

Don't you worry your little head, Missy, Mister Leonard said. I'll take good care of your mama. Here, he said. I got something for you that's a whole lot better treat than store bread.

He wouldn't have said that if he'd known how my brother Randall loved store bread. Randall could take a pile of slices, tear the middles out of all of them, and roll those middles up into a ball of dough. You like, he'd say. Lucky thing was, Randall meant *he* liked it. Lucky, 'cause Randall's hands were always dirty and those dough-balls were none too white by the time he got that far with rolling them. That's just how Randall talked, back when he was talking. You like, for I like.

Mister Leonard didn't take but three steps to get all the way to the porch railing, his legs were so long. When he held out his hands, his sleeves rode up his arms a ways, and I could see the brown hairs curling over his watchband.

I wasn't meaning to be rude, exactly, with my rocking. I was just staring at that watchband. Pa never wore a watch. Don't need one, Pa said. The mill whistle blew three times a day is what he meant, when the mill was going and we had the rent money to live in town. Out at the cabin where we couldn't hear the whistle, we never much needed to know anyhow.

Mister Leonard put his two fists down on the porch right in front of my rocker. He uncurled his fingers, and left two hard candies wrapped in cellophane under the railing. I could tell he'd got them at Wilbur's Penny Store. The sour balls at Wilbur's, the red ones, were Randall's favorites. They aren't cherry red, they're more watermelon. That's how I knew where he got them.

What do you say, Grace? Mama asked. She had her hands on her hips then, and I saw she'd got her belt cinched one notch tighter than the worn one. Gra-ace, she said. Her neck had gone pink right down into her collar. It always colored up that way when she got mad.

I raised her better than that, Mama said to Mister Leonard, as if he needed an apology. Leave off that rocking, you hear me? You'll be wearing grooves in that porch.

I brought my feet up to make it look like I'd stop. Even with my knees up, I could keep a decent swing going just shifting my weight.

Mister Leonard's talking to you, girl.

I'm not paying her any mind, he said to Mama. She's just a shy one. Aren't you? he said to me. He laughed a little then, as if things were easy and he had them all figured out. It wasn't a mean laugh, but I didn't like hearing it because I knew different. Well, he said. I'll bring you two more of them candies when I bring your mama back. And he put his arm around her to steer her to his car. His jacket swung out into the air behind him like it was a cape, and he hooked his thumb into the top of her belt. His other fingers just hung down straight, touching the bulge at her hip.

Put the knife in the sink, Grace, when you're done with the jelly, Mama called over her shoulder. And rinse it good. When he opened the door for her, she sat herself on the car seat, leaving her legs outside. Then she lifted them inside one by one, smoothing her skirt, and he shut the door.

As the car backed toward the sugar maple, the radio switched on inside. Mama had her elbow out the window, as if she always rode about in big old cars like Mister Leonard's with that "Bye, Bye Love" song coming on the radio, as if she had nothing on her mind of a Sunday afternoon but going to the quarry. Her other arm was up along the back of the seat. Resting there, up behind his shoulders in the dark inside the car, her bare arm looked long and silvery, like a sardine.

Once they'd gone, I studied those old candies Mister Leonard left under the railing. I stared at them 'til the shade moved off of them and they started throwing their own shadows. With the two of them sitting there, it seemed like one was meant for Randall, and that started me missing him. Randall, that is. I wondered whether they had suckers where Pa had taken him. The state hospital, Pa'd called it. Somehow, I didn't think so.

I reached down, and I picked up those candies, letting them roll about in my palm 'til my mouth started watering. Then I unwrapped one, just at one end, and I spit a good-sized bubble on it. I twisted the wrapper back up around it just as tight as you please and put it back right where Mister Leonard'd left it. The



other one I slid into the front pocket of my overalls, to keep it safe for Randall. I'd need to find a good spot for it in our treasure place or a squirrel'd get it for sure.

The treasure place was this slate rock up under grandpa's old canoe. The canoe lay along the south side of the cabin, upside down, its bow raised up on a stack of rocks. It wasn't dark under it exactly, not like you might think, but more yellow. From the hickory. On the outside the canoe was green, but the inside was hickory wood, the color of honey.

I'd found that treasure place the same day Randall left. Randall hadn't settled in much at the cabin—I guess none of us had—but Randall'd taken to banging his head against the wall. That morning I was trying to get him to talk to me, to keep him from that banging. Randall, I was saying, do you want a cookie? He wasn't talking much then, but sometimes, if you were lucky, he'd echo what you'd said. Whatever you said, he'd say it right back. And he was just saying back to me, Randall, do you want a cookie? when Mama came up behind me.

Give him the damn cookie, she said. She slapped me pretty good and I gave him the cookie, but she started up crying anyways. Least I think she was crying. Her face was scrunched up and her shoulders shaking, but she wasn't making any noise. I was glad that Pa came in then because the quiet in her scared me.

Pa must've heard the slap, because he put his fingertips to my cheek right where she'd hit me. Here, Pa said, give your brother this. Pa reached in his shirt pocket and handed me a brass lid to a mason jar. Ever since Mama'd figured out that Randall liked circles, Pa was given to saving round things for him—pennies, washers, jar lids, spools and such. Now, he said, take your brother and go outside.

Randall was still in his blue racecar pajamas, and I wanted to keep him warm. That's how we found the treasure place. The sun was on the canoe, so I crawled up under it and pulled Randall in after. I didn't want him sinking away from me, so I gathered up the little black seeds from a milkweed pod that was left there. I worked on layering them one by one in the brass lid, and Randall squatted there next to me, watching in the buttery light. The only sound was the tiny plink the seeds made and the whoosh of Randall's breathing.

Here, Randall, I said when I was done. I held the lid out to him with both hands. See, I showed him. See. A golden plate. A king's plate. He took the lid from me, and he put it on the slate rock and he spun it. The seeds shifted, and he drew a shiny track through them with his finger. When he spun it round again, the track closed up and the seeds evened out.

It's all round inside, Randall said, spinning. You like.

Yes, I said. You like, Randall.

Randall's blond hair fell forward over the sides of his face, and I could see the little hollow at the back of his neck where Mama used to like to kiss us. I wanted to hug him because he was talking and because his neck looked so soft and thin, but I knew better. The thing was, Randall was past liking being touched, but none of us were past touching him, especially Mama.

Pa and Mama must've moved about inside then, because I could hear their voices. Pa's was stone-even and Mama's was all tatty.

I'm taking him for help, Pa was saying.

No, she said.

He's getting worse—

No. I won't let you.

—and he needs help.

No, no, no, no, no, she said. Her voice went rushing over his like creek water.

It's not fair to either of them, Pa said. Or to us.

He'll get better, I swear it.

They went quiet inside then, and I heard Pa let himself out the door.

When Pa came back it was in the Scudder pickup with Joe Scudder, Billy's dad. The Scudders'd been our old town-neighbors. Mama must've known what they were there for, because she started hollering from the porch, before Pa'd even got to it. She was wearing her polka dot dress, the one Randall needed her to wear before he'd eat, and she'd put red lipstick on, as if she were the one going off. No, she hollered at Pa, you can't take him. Joe Scudder just stood there next to that truck of his, scuffing his boots in the mud, like he wasn't hearing her.

Pa had to hoist Randall in his arms to get him into the pickup. Randall was little, but he could make himself real heavy. He arched



his back away from Pa and went stiff. You could just see Randall getting heavier, by looking at Pa's knees as he picked his way through the ruts to the pickup.

It's not my fault, Mama said to Pa's back. These woods are what done it. Being stuck in these here woods. Once Pa'd got himself in the truck with the door shut, she started screaming, You'll see. Those fancy doctors, they'll tell you it wasn't my fault. And don't you be calling, she yelled. Just be bringing the boy home. I don't want everyone on that party line knowing our business.

It's no one's fault, Pa said, rolling down the window. His face was grey and he looked tired. This isn't about you, he said, or anyone but the boy here. He needs help. You can't keep pretending different, he said. You can't.

She went back inside the cabin then, hugging her sweater closed. Pa and me and Billy Scudder's daddy, all of us could hear her way in the back. Cawing, like crows after an owl.

I'm staying with him at the hospital down in Northampton, Pa said to me. At least until they see what's to be done. And maybe there's work there, too. Pa slapped his palm flat against the pickup door. Okay, he said to Joe Scudder. It's time. Take care of your mama, Bean, 'til I get back.

The Scudder pick up was the last car back this way, and it's just been me and Mama here in the months since Pa left. She's had nothing for a Sunday afternoon but the smell of Pa's fingers on the soft bills in the envelopes he sends her. Once she takes the money out, I keep the envelopes under the canoe. I stack them on the rock, with Randall's mason jar lid weighting them down. Sometimes I wet my finger to the ink to make sure his writing's real.

When Ma come back with Mister Leonard, the lights were what woke me, so I knew it was late. I was lying out there, under the canoe. I had my nightgown on, and I'd fallen asleep. I woke when the lights started scooting around inside it, like when you stand in the middle of the room, twirling with a flashlight. Then I heard the engine and figured the lights were coming from a car.

Gracie, Mama called. Gracie. Oh, my God. I had no idea it was this late.



I thought you said this was your folks' place. Mister Leonard's voice was farther back. That your folks'd be back before we come home. Jeez, he said. You should have told me.

Mama's steps kept right 'til she bumbled coming up the steps. I heard her swear some and then she dropped her sandals on the kindling box. The light flicked on in the kitchen window right over the canoe.

Gracie? she started calling. Where are you?

I guess she heard me crawling out from the treasure place because she pushed open the kitchen door. You okay, honey? she asked. I was still blinking against the light when she reached for one of my hands. Oooh, you're cold, she said. Gracie, you okay? I didn't mean to be gone so long. I swear I didn't, she said.

Her hands felt warm and smooth but I wasn't saying anything. I was trying to hear what Mister Leonard was doing, in behind her. But Mama was so loud, she took up all my listening room. You forgive me? she started saying. Forgive me, Gracie?

A stool scraped the kitchen floor, and the sound of it got Mama going. Come see what we got you, she said, as if she'd just remembered. Gracie, c'mon. She tugged at my arm then, like Randall used to tug at it when he wanted something, only harder. You, he'd say. There weren't no more to do with her tugging than there'd been with Randall's, so I slit my eyes against the light and followed her into the kitchen.

Mister Leonard had pulled the stool up to the table, like he knew better than to sit in a chair with a place mat down in front of it. Randall's and Pa's were the clean ones these days, with Randall's napkin folded just the way he liked it. Mister Leonard was twirling the lazy Susan and looking at Grandma's labels on the old jelly jars: quince, crab apple, gooseberry. Course they'd been empty since Grandma'd passed. She'd passed after Grandpa, but Mister Leonard didn't know that from the sound of his talking, his thinking they might be coming home. There was no blaming people, I figured, for what they haven't been told.

I just stood there outside of the circle of light, curling my toes against the cold in the linoleum. But Mama, she swept 'round behind him. Come see what we got you, Gracie, she said. And she brought up this huge cardboard box, all white and shiny with a see-through window on the top. She laid it flat across Mister

Leonard's knees. Maybe it was his hat being off, or Mama's being so proud of what was in that box, but everything about Mister Leonard looked smaller in the kitchen.

Mama reached right in and she pulled out this big old boy doll with freckles and fat lips. The boy doll grinned up at Mama, and when his mouth opened like he wanted to speak, I swallowed pretty near all the air between him and me.

Look at you! Mama crowed, holding the boy doll by the arms. Just look at you.

She settled the boy doll on Mister Leonard's lap. He was so big that his head fetched right up to Mister Leonard's shoulder. He had on a big-checked shirt, a blue bandana bibbed round his neck, and green work gloves. His hair and shirt and lips were all about the color of the polka dots on our old cinnamon dresses. Mama squatted on her heels to stretch the boy doll's flat legs out in front, pulling the cuffs straight at his ankles.

He talks even, Mama said then, fussing with the boy doll's gloves. The way she said it, I almost thought it might be true. So matter-of-fact, like she didn't care much about anybody's answering. She might've been talking of nothing more important than the weather: The wind's come up, a front's passing. It's like that when folks say something they're sure of. They don't go needing an answer.

When she finished with his gloves, she laid an ear to her shoulder to get a better view of him. The light caught the top of his cheeks, and they shone like May apples. Except for his toes turning out to the side, the boy doll was perfect. Mama thought so, you could tell. There, she said, as if he was just the way she wanted. There. And she leaned over and kissed him, leaving a smudge of lipstick across the part in his thick cinnamon hair.

See what we got you? she said to me.

Mister Leonard, he was the one that saw I didn't know who the boy doll was. This is Howdy, he whispered at me, jouncing the doll gently on his knees. Howdy Doody. From TV.

I fixed on that Howdy's mouth. Mama said he talked, but I couldn't see how Howdy'd be saying much of anything. From the big cracks running down both sides of his chin, it seemed his mouth must've broken since he'd talked for Mama. If we'd been back in town, I could've called Billy Scudder over. Hey, I could've



hollered at the fence, we've got one of those Howdy dolls in here. I figured Billy would've known about them. The Scudders had their own TV, and Billy was good with his hands.

Coffee? Mama said to Mister Leonard then. You need coffee for the drive home. And she made for the stove. We got coffee, don't we, Gracie? She started poking through what little there was on the shelves, sliding boxes every which way and humming to herself, as if she were in some rich lady's pantry.

You want to hear him talk, Gracie? Mister Leonard said. Howdy was still on his lap. Howdy Doody?

No, I wanted to say, we don't need Howdy's talking. Something about my Mama's humming and those cracks in Howdy's chin had turned me scared. The idea of his talking, well, the idea of it might keep her happy. Sometimes just the idea of things can do that, keep a person happy. But Howdy's trying was likely to cause Mama to leave off humming.

Howdy, the boy doll echoed then. Howdy Doody. And he started jouncing on Mister Leonard's knees, like he was trying to boost his strength up for more words than just his name. Howdy Do-do-do, the boy doll said. How do you do-do-do?

He could talk all right, but his voice sounded hoarse, and his mouth clacked when it fell all the way open. It clacked so fast on the do-do-do's that it was like his teeth were chattering from the cold. Once Howdy got himself going, there was no stopping him.

Say kids, he croaked. What time is it? Howdy craned around to look at Mama. That coffee sure smells good. And you must be Grace, Howdy clacked at me. You are a mighty pretty sight. A sight for sore eyes. Yessiree.

I could see Mama over Howdy's shoulder. She'd quit with her humming, but her hands still being busy was a good sign. She was swiping them with the dishtowel from the chrome bar in front of the oven. Maybe she hadn't heard Howdy, rasping and clacking like that. Or didn't remember Pa saying that the day Randall left. Aren't the two of you a sight for sore eyes, Pa'd said, up there under that canoe?

Don't you be fresh now, Mama said. She'd finished with the towel, but she'd started louding up again. On account of Howdy's

clacking, I figured. Without that clacking, you might have thought his talking was the real thing.

Mama took the bag of sugar from the shelf and stood it down hard on the kitchen table in front of Howdy, jumping the teaspoon next to me.

What do you say, Grace? Mama asked, louder. Don't you like him?

I'd been too busy worrying about Howdy's broken chin to be doing any talking, but now with Howdy quiet I started up worrying about Mister Leonard's wanting sugar. That sugar bag was harder than old plaster. If you're planning on having some, I wanted to tell him, you're gonna have to scrape off what you want with that spoon.

Grace? Didn't you hear me, girl? Mama said.

'S okay. Let her be, Mister Leonard said. It's late. Mister Leonard reached around with one hand to help her with the mugs.

Don't you be telling her what's okay, Mama said.

It's best to hold the sugar spoon straight down into the bag, is what I needed to tell Mister Leonard. Hold it straight down, and grasp the round part hard with your thumb. Otherwise, the sugar'll spray out every which way, and there's no telling what'll happen.

Don't you be telling her what's okay, Mama said to Mister Leonard. I raised her better than that. Grace, you hear me? Mama had the percolator off the stove, but she'd froze up, waiting for me to say something.

It's okay, I told you, Mister Leonard said. I thought you said it was your other one that didn't talk sometimes? The little one, that's asleep? Shouldn't you be checking on him, anyhow?

Mama jabbed her percolator-arm over at my chair as if I were the one telling tales about Randall. Coffee sloshed out on the floor, and she banged that percolator down. She got herself behind me and started pushing down something fierce with her hands on my shoulders. Grace, you talk now, you hear? The way her thumb pressed on me it felt too big to be hers.

You hear me? she said.

Hold on now, Mister Leonard said.

Your name's not Randall, is it?

Whoa, now, be gentle now, he said.



Name's not Randall, I wanted to say, but I couldn't. Mama was shaking me as if she could shake the words out, but they wouldn't come. They just spun in my throat, deeper and deeper, breaking into sharp-edged pieces.

Hey! Howdy said. Hey, hey, hey.

Not Randall, I was wanting to say. Not. Randall.

You keep acting like that, Mama said, and you won't be talking either.

Here you go, Missy, Howdy said, sliding himself over onto my lap. Here you go. Howdy's raspiness was gone, and his sliding over like that got Mama to stop shaking me.

Oh! she said, as if Howdy had surprised her. Oh.

Howdy sat in my lap, letting me hug him. I buried my face in his cinnamon-checked shirt 'til I bumped right up against this hard little lump. I reached up and felt it. It was a bead. A smooth wooden bead.

Hanging down on Howdy's back, out from under his bandana, was a little woven two-colored string with this round wooden bead at the end of it.

I reached up and I pulled that bead, and Howdy's mouth went clack. Even from behind him I could hear it. Clack. Mama had to hear it, too. She was standing right behind my chair. See, Mama. I wanted to say. Clack. See, not Randall. Clack. Randall's your son. I'm Grace. Grace, the one that's here. Clack. Grace, Mama.

And then I couldn't help myself. I pulled that round bead as if I'd hooked on something underwater that I needed. Something I couldn't recognize, but I'd know what it was if I only pulled hard enough. So I pulled it and pulled it until I yanked that bead right off and it went skittering across the floor under the stove. It rolled under the stove just as the sugar sprayed out every which way.

Jeez, Mister Leonard said, putting down his spoon. Jeez, like he knew that whatever else he could say wasn't what any of us needed.

Mama sank into the seat next to me as if something had let go of her, taking all her air with it. She sat there, and then she reached out and stroked Howdy's legs where they lay flat on top of my bare ones. She straightened out his cuffs again. Oh—you poor, sweet boy, she said to him. You poor sweet thing. Then she

leaned down and started patting the floor for the bead. She scooped it up and let it roll about in her palm as if she wanted to be sure she had it right.

Grace? Mama said when the bead went still.

Yes, Mama, I said. I'm sorry, Mama.

Oh, Grace, she said. With her closest hand, she combed my hair back from my forehead with her fingers. She ran her fingers all through my hair. When I leaned into her hands, she started curling the ends under, as if she were making little hair pillows for where it hurt. It's not anybody's fault, she said.

It's funny, but I knew then that Randall wasn't coming back. He wasn't coming back any more than that Howdy doll could get himself to real talking. But we still had to wait for him harder than ever. Sometimes, I figure, there's such a thing as good pretending. It's not the same as hope, but when it don't hurt anybody, and you do it together, good pretending maybe is the next best thing.

So we sat there, Mama and me, just like that, for the longest time.